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ABSTRACT

The struggle of one Cree community, the Waskaganish (formerly called Rupert House) in Quebec, to maintain its own language and culture within the larger multicultural Canadian context has led to the creation and development of a linguistic experiment, the Cree Way Project. After a discussion of the Canadian historical context, this report describes Quebec and Amerindian education and the Cree Way Project. The project was a first attempt to help the Cree people remain a nation, introducing Cree syllabic readers for primary grade children. Since 1978 the project has been incorporated into the Cree School Board's curriculum in one community and has begun to be implemented in seven others. There are now more than 500 textbooks printed in Cree syllabics, and a Cree immersion program is in its second year. The school calendar honors Cree traditions such as hunting and ceremonial activities. The school, with its rapidly growing native teaching staff, seeks to meet the needs and maximize the abilities of the Waskaganish community. The Cree experience supports the hypothesis that the education of indigenous people in their own language will further the process of second language acquisition. Contains 18 references. (LB)

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MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION: AN EXPERIMENTAL PROJECT BY THE CREE INDIANS OF WASKAGANISH IN QUEBEC, CANADA

by

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for

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Multilingualism is a reality shared by many countries around the globe. My own country, Canada, while officially bilingual, counts among its multiple heritage languages over 50 indigenous American Indian languages. China, officially monolingual, also recognizes over 50 minority languages among its multiple ethnic groups. Both countries have engaged in multicultural policy making and both have committed themselves to multilingual education, although actual implementation has differed greatly, as the two following examples will illustrate.

The Dai in Yunnan have enjoyed bilingual public education for several decades. In the 1950's, a modernized, simplified Dai script was officially introduced in local schools. During the cultural revolution Han education was emphasized. In the 1980's, education in the Dai language and script has again become the norm in the first three primary grades. From the 4th grade on though, Han continues to be the language of instruction. (The traditional Dai script has been reintroduced in religious institutions as a result of a recent revival of religious practices.)

For the last two decades, the Cree in Quebec have been studying the Cree language and script (syllabics) within the public school system, though the dominant language of instruction remains English. One Cree community is now aiming at schooling entirely in the Cree language within the first few primary grades, thus setting up a model of early primary schooling in the pupils' mother tongue, similar to that of the Dai in China. Two peoples from very different linguistic and cultural backgrounds grapple with partially similar linguistic issues: first versus second language acquisition, writing systems, formal language of instruction, language maintenance etc...

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This paper is an attempt to present the example of one Cree community, the Waskaganish in Quebec, and how its struggle to maintain its own language and culture (within the larger Canadian context) has led to the ingenious creation and development of a linguistic experiment, the Cree Way Project. Let me present you briefly some background information on multiculturalism/multilingualism in Canada and the position of the province of Quebec with respect to multilingual education for its native American population.

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Multiculturalism, which has always been a distinguishing feature of Canadian society, was given formal recognition by the government's establishment, in 1963, of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. This was followed in 1969 by the passing of the Official Languages Act, making English and French the two official languages of Canada. Two years later, in 1971, a national policy of multiculturalism was formulated and declared in the House of Commons. It espoused the following principles:

1. "Although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other."

   - Declaration of the principle of equality of status made by Prime Minister P.E. Trudeau in the House of Commons, October 8, 1971.

2. The "very essence of Canadian identity" is its pluralism.

3. The principle of sharing the Canadian culture extends to all cultural communities, including those which are of neither British nor French origin; therefore all cultural groups should be regarded equally by Canadian institutions (as deserving of government assistance) for the enrichment of the national life.

4. A commitment to the principle of free choice of lifestyles and cultural traits;

5. A commitment to the protection and furthering of civil and human rights.

The policy was based on the assumption that confidence in one's own culture is a prerequisite for mutual respect and tolerance across cultural boundaries, and would ultimately help to break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. It was also hoped that a policy of multiculturalism would contribute to Canadian unity and engender a feeling of loyalty beyond ethnicity. "Only pluralistic cultures seem to be invariably dynamic and robustly creative..." (Dorotich, 1981)

In 1982 multiculturalism was enshrined in the Canadian Constitution as part of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (sections 15 and 27). Six years later, in July 1988, multiculturalism was legislated in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Bill C-93), an act advocating the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada.

The concept of multiculturalism, though, was not new to the North American continent. A multitude of different Indian nations (agriculturalists, hunters and fishing people) with different linguistic affiliations, was indigenous to this continent. Well before the arrival of the first European settlers, some Iroquoian nations in eastern North America sought a political and social unity. Out of this desire grew the confederacy of the Five Nations (American Indian Confederacy of the Iroquoian Nations - the Mohawk, Oneida, Onendaga, Seneca and Cayuga (Morgan, 1972)) - a living example of true national unity to the new settlers. The American Constitution, incidentally, is based on some of the Five Nations' traditional teachings.

So we see that the indigenous population of the North American continent (including Canada) has for thousands of years been pluricultural and plurilingual; and that collaboration among some of these nations has also been a historical reality. Lately the Canadian government has followed this multicultural example by establishing its own national policy, which, it hoped, would ultimately affect the educational sector, primarily through its provincial application and administration. (In Canada, public education is under provincial jurisdiction, with the exception of American Indian education, which

falls nominally under federal jurisdiction.) The provinces have responded variously to this challenge of cultural diversity (Lessard and Crespo, 1989).

Quebec and Amerindian Education

Let's now have a closer look at Quebec, and the composition of its six and a half million inhabitants. Canada's francophone minority is the dominant culture of this province, numbering 81,4% of the total population. The English number 8,9%; the other important linguistic group (8,1% of the population) is comprised of immigrants; and among the remaining 1,6% are numbered the American Indian nations.

Since confederation there have been two public school systems, one catholic and mostly French and the other, protestant and mostly English. Quebec, althouth it has no official policy on multicultural education, still provides services with a cultural and intercultural orientation.

As mentioned previously, education of the American Indian population is the responsibility of the federal government. Several decades ago, this responsibility was delegated to the provinces, with funds being provided by the Ministry of Indian Affairs in Ottawa.

In 1970, Quebec permitted the Amerindian population, whether instructed in French or in English, to have their native languages taught within the public school system (both federal and provincial). For Quebec this meant the implementation of Mohawk, Attikamek, Algonquin, Micmac, Montagnais and Cree within their local school programs, where these languages were represented. For the Mohawk in Kahnawake (Feurer, 1990) and Oka (Feurer, 1976), for instance, where the native language was slowly disappearing and children were primarily monolingual speakers of English, Mohawk was taught initially for 20 minutes per day as a second language. The Cree in the North learned to read and write their language (in Cree syllabics) still alive and spoken in the Cree communities. (For the example of the Montagnais in Betsiamites, see Drapeau, 1984).

The Quebec Ministry of Education's native language instruction program (though federally funded) was a truly multicultural response to the need of native people. At the same time, the Ministry hoped to make schooling more appealing to a population where the dropout rate, at the high school level especially, has always been remarkably high and way above the national average. (The 1931 census (according to Shamai and Corrigan, 1987) revealed that only 65% of Indians and Inuit attended school as compared to 93% of the total Canadian-born population. Fifty years later the Indians and Inuit were still at the bottom with respect to school attendance.)

A MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION: THE CREE OF WASKAGANISH, QUEBEC

Waskaganish, formerly called Rupert House, is a remote Indian community settled along the mighty Rupert River not far from where it falls into James Bay, an immense saltwater in northern Quebec. It is one of the eight Cree communities nestled along the eastern shore of James Bay, about 700 miles north of Montreal. Its typical northern ecology of small trees, shrubs and plants, is inhabited by a highly diversified wildlife, including bear, moose, wolf, beaver and geese. In spite of the long, harsh winters and the demanding environment, the Cree have adapted and survived, through hunting and gathering, in harmonious co-existence with their natural surroundings.

Today, though, the Cree way of life has greatly changed. Hunting has decreased as wildlife has become rarer and contact with European Canadians and their culture has increased.

For example, since the 1960's, each of the eight Cree communities (reserves) has been subsumed within the regular, federal public school system - with curriculum, textbooks and materials patterned on the European-Canadian model. Although mandatory education became a reality for all Cree children at Waskaganish, the concept of "public schooling" remained foreign to Cree society, which was founded on the traditional method of teaching in the immediate context of the extended family, through modelling by its older members. (Children themselves chose or changed their teaching-relatives, as

well as started or ended their personal learning situations as desired.) By the time a child entered school, he or she was already highly trained in appropriate skills (Wintrob, 1968). (For example, a 6 years old girl would be expected to care for an aging grandmother or her younger siblings.) By comparison, the inapplicable skills learned at school seemed absurd and meaningless (Bagley, 1984).

The Euro-Canadian school system was, in fact, ill prepared to adapt its curriculum to Cree values and lifestyle; although, in the meantime, the adapting of the Cree to European customs and concepts had become essential to their very survival (Barry et al., 1982). In 1973, the Cree Way Project was created by John Murdoch, a local school principal, as a direct response to the low degree of success and lack of adaptability of the local public schooling system to Cree children's needs and abilities (Murdoch, 1984: 293).

At this point, elementary school was the local concern of the Waskaganish reserve. High school education was offered only outside of the reserve, in Fort George ("up north") or in Noranda or Sault Saint Marie (in Ontario), where most of the young native people (above 90% according to G. Murdoch) unfortunately dropped out.

High School education seemed to correspond even less to the need of these young people than had the local primary school education. The lack, also, of caring siblings was a disturbing factor for these adolescents, since it implied not only a change of environment (climate) but also of culture (housing, work, food, customs, family interactions/hierarchy) and language. Now goose or moosemeat was replaced by hamburgers and hot-dogs.

Linguistic innovation: the Cree Way Project

In the midst of all this upheaval, the Cree people wanted to remain a nation (Barry, 1989: 8). The Cree Way Project was a first attempt to apply this attitude within the school system and help Cree children feel more at ease, by valorizing their own language and their own traditions. Materials were

developed in Cree syllabics, drawing on the expertise of local resource people such as storytellers, elders who now hunted less, artists and competent speakers of the language who were familiar with the syllabics. A trained Cree syllabic instructor spent at least half an hour per day in each classroom teaching students to read and write in Cree. At the same time, a team of language and curriculum personnel (all local people) were busy preparing readers, workbooks and materials (slides, handicrafts, videotapes) to assist both Cree and English language teachers. Even the production of materials was done on the reserve, by specially trained members of the community. (See National Film Board, 1977.)

Indeed, the Cree Way Project had set itself a noble task: to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between two alien traditions: the native peoples- nomadic hunters and the European Canadians - once agricultural, now post-industrial city dwellers; the former relying on an oral tradition, the latter on a written one; the former - synthetic, conceptual, experience-bound (concrete) and intuitive in their approach; the latter analytical, abstract and pragmatic (Murdoch 1984). How could the gap between two such conflicting traditions be narrowed without assimilation of the minority?

It is now known that a minority culture can adapt (its language use, for instance) to another without great loss, if it feels secure within its own boundaries (Lambert, 1974). The Cree Way Project sought, as its first, essential step, to validate the Cree way of life in Waskaganish by introducing Cree syllabic readers (as well as workbooks in English on Cree culture). Already the written word had gained some prestige within the Indian community; through schooling and various government contacts the written tradition began to seem to be more tangible and "permanent" than the oral one (Murdoch, 1984: 254). Agreements and treaties with the government (which were always written down) also reinforced this imputed status. Gerti Murdoch (a local, native born anthropologist and educator) feels that the written form of Cree will also help to preserve the language, in its structure and vocabulary, by making it less susceptible to English loans and to code switching.

Cree language and culture were to be consolidated among the children in the

form of printed syllabic readers in the hope that their contents would help the children to become more solidly anchored in their own tradition, and that its written form would raise its prestige and at the same time make reading and writing more meaningful. A truly intracultural context of learning was to be established (with oral tradition now being recorded as well) in which literacy was relevant and therefore interesting and rewarding.

The project implied a context of teaching where children were met in terms known and familiar to them, within a conceptual framework that made sense to them and from which skills could be transferred to a new learning context. (See Mexican study by Modiano, 1975.) With the new culturally relevant workbooks the learning of English became less difficult and made children more receptive to learning in general (Murdoch, 1984:244).

Within this new classroom model, a local resource person was obviously the best-equipped educator. But institutional barriers prevented the hiring of such "unqualified" people, with the exception of the Cree language teacher. Initially, a local linguistic resource person qualified for teaching if they were fluent in speaking, reading and writing Cree. Yet these qualifications soon proved insufficient within the classroom. In response to methodological and pedagogical gaps, the University of Quebec in Chicoutimi started a program, in the early seventies, to train Indian (language) teachers. Waskaganish had several of its staff attend these courses, first taught during the summer vacation, later on during the spring and fall, at one of the eight communities in James Bay. (The program is currently administrated by McGill University.) Linguists such as Margaret MacKenzie and the author (the latter, in 1972-73) took part in this academic program, assisting the community in its remarkable undertakings.

The Cree Way Project today

The Cree Way Project still exists today, though it has undergone many changes. First of all, since 1978, the project has been incorporated into the Cree School Board's own curriculum in James Bay. The other seven communities have

started to implement it and use its texbooks (now numbering over 500) printed in Cree syllabics.

In Waskaganish, there is currently a staff of seven people working on language and cultural development. The actual printing of materials has been done in Ottawa (Canada's capital, in the province of Ontario) since 1985, due to technical difficulties. The reserve at Waskaganish (population, 1200) can now offer both primary and high school education to its 498 school-aged children. Enrolment at the pre-school, kindergarten and elementary levels is currently 148.

Parents now have a multilingual choice for their young children. A Cree immersion program (using only Cree as the language of communication and instruction) is currently in its second year of existence. It was begun in 1988, at the pre-school level. During the current academic year the program was extended to the kindergarten level; next year the first grade will be included, and so on, until the fourth grade. From the fifth grade on, these students will choose between a French or English school program. Cree syllabics and cultural programs, though, will continue throughout high school, from the fifth grade on.

The pre-school immersion program has already successfully passed its first test. At a recent gathering, a 4-year old immersion student's wide vocabulary allowed him to out-talk, in Cree, a 7-year old (non-immersion) student on the subject of trapping in the bush. The community's concern over frequent code switching, or, as Gerti Murdoch calls it, the "sloppy" Cree being spoken by its young people, loaded with borrowed English terms and expressions, has further motivated it to opt for a Cree immersion program. (The influence of television, avidly consumed by the reserve's young people since 1976, is felt to contribute to this loss of proficiency.) In addition, incompetent native speakers tend to transfer their incompetence to second language learning (observation made by the author on a Mohawk reserve, in the province of Quebec. See also, Hamers, 1982:57). The immersion program was in effect a preventive measure against the ultimate loss of Cree language proficiency and general linguistic competence among its speakers (Lambert, 1977).

Each local classroom now has the chance to re-experience bush life, at least four or five times a year for a whole day, at the bushcamp (twelve miles outside the reserve) set up especially for the Waskaganish children and funded privately by the local Cree Trapper Association. Traditional survival skills, such as trapping, beadwork, the construction of snowshoes and other tools, cooking and fur tanning are taught by three local resource persons. Each child also keeps a syllabic diary of the experince. This outdoor program hopes to safeguard a tradition related to the art of survival, a tradition currently in grave danger of disappearing, because of formal schooling on the one hand and loss of land on the other. Regular school requirements now prevent children from accompanying their parents to the trapline for extended periodes of time (i.e., three to nine months) and acquiring the survival skills which had traditionally been transmitted orally, from one generation to the next. The disapearance of traditional hunting grounds through encroaching industrialization and resource extraction technologies, has become acute with the government sponsored James Bay Project to construct huge, ecologically devastating hydro-electric dams in the area. (The James Bay Project has been called "the greatest environmental disaster in continental history" (Green Energy Conference, Montreal, September 1989). If the final phase of this mammoth project is realized, it will leave 75% of the trappers entirely without land.)

Even the school calendar is beginning to reflect the commitment of the Cree Way Project to a fostering of the traditional trapping experience. Summer vacations have been shortened to allow students to accompany their family on the goose hunt for one week in the fall and for three weeks in the spring, to participate in traditional hunting and ceremonial activities. A full 80% of students are indeed utilizing these scheduled breaks to accompany their elders into the bush and learn the traditional ways.

School, with its adapted curriculum, integrated schedule and Cree immersion program, with its rapidly growing native teaching staff, seeks to meet the needs and maximize the abilities of the Waskaganish community. Of its 42-member teaching staff, 22 are native. In fact, all the elementary school teachers, with the exception of three French (out of a total of six French-speaking teachers) are native born, and are thus at ease in the Cree way. They

are neverthless (having been trained in Euro-Canadian institutions) obliged by the adapted curriculum, together with the rest of the staff, to rethink and transpose the Cree way in terms of formal teaching methods. Regular workshops are offered by the local school board to assist teachers in this challenging task, with suggested "hands on" activities (rather than abstraction) and organized group activities (rather than competitive individual tasks). There is, in any case, no space for competitive behaviour within the Cree tradition, where sharing is its most fundamental premise, the critical key to survival. In addition to workshops, the local resource centre provides support to teachers with, for example, a display of locally handicrafted tools and artifacts and accompanying reference materials (pictures, slides, videotapes, casettes and so forth).

A closer look at the high school, with its 230 students, suggests some of the remaining difficulties in curriculum adaptation to the real needs of Cree adolescents. The dropout rate, while much lower than the 90% national average (Clark & MacKenzie, 1980) pertaining among natives in the 1970's, when students were obliged to seek their secondary education off the reserve, is still very high (60%), especially in the last two grades. The reduced dropout rate might be explained by the appealing specialist options now available in art, mathematics and computer science as well as Cree language and culture. Furthermore, today's dropouts are reintegrated as quickly as possible into the reserve's many certification programs (cooking, construction, plumbing, etc.), mangagement courses and training programs (eg., fish camp training) to prevent the loss to the community of these precious human resources.

Higher education is still available only south of James Bay; yet most of the graduates, 99% in fact, return home after graduation as skilled multilingual, multicultural persons - a new resource and a true asset to their communities.

Thus ends our sketch of an indigenous people's efforts to adapt its school system to its own traditions within an intracultural setting in which learning will ultimately become the relevant and fertile soil for the acquisition of a new tradition. A new Cree is emerging - proud and self-confident in his/her own culture, and competent, linguistically and socially, in its newly acquired

cultural setting - in short, truly Cree and truly Canadian.

In conclusion, the experience of the Cree strongly supports our primary hypothesis that the education of indigenous people in their own language will further the process of second language acquisition. This is especially so if, as in the case of the Cree Way Project, the necessary time and adaptation techniques (such as the integration of familiar learning styles) are provided. As communications technology reduces the distances between communities, nations and continents, we are moving into a new era in which we can enjoy the wealth of cultural and linguistic diversity. With a growing concern for the wellbeing of the whole human family, the fostering and promoting of a truly multicultural and multilingual planet is in its making.

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